



## Meritocracy in the Profession of Arms

Colonel Thomas Boccardi, U.S. Army

*The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of DOD or any of its agencies.*

Colonel Thomas Boccardi is an appointed Senior Service College Fellow at Yale, Jackson Institute for Global Affairs. He most recently served as the Infantry Branch Chief, Human Resources Command. His combat experiences include commanding a Stryker battalion in Iraq, and his operational experience includes deployment with the Implementation Force for the Bosnian Peace Accord as well as partnership exchanges with foreign countries in Eastern Europe, Central Europe, the Pacific Rim, and Southeast Asia.

Airmen from the 127th Wing line up to board a plane to Afghanistan for a four-month deployment, 25 September 2011 (USAF, SGT Anna-Marie Wyant)

UNDER THE PRESSURE of fiscal restraint and a new strategy that excludes the probability of large-scale stability operations, the Army must manage a deliberate drawdown. Most notably, it must reduce its end-strength by 80,000 soldiers, including eight brigade combat teams (BCTs).<sup>1</sup> Historically, the Army has not fared well during drawdowns, and its Achilles heel is retention of special talent. The Army's enduring axiom, "Soldiers are the centerpiece of the Army," reflects the institution's deep investment in its personnel.<sup>2</sup>

The Army's most expensive—and most important—resource is its people. Over the last decade of war, the Army created models that enabled rapid growth, e.g., Army Force Generation (ARFORGEN). Now it must modify these models to meet its future needs. As the Army marches toward a smaller, capability-focused force (joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational), it must implement an effective system of talent management to preserve its body of irreplaceable experience.<sup>3</sup>

Recognizing the Army was "out of balance" in early 2009, the Secretary of the Army established "institutional adaptation" to "more effectively and efficiently deliver trained and ready forces that are capable of meeting the needs of the commanders."<sup>4</sup> The Army stressed existing systems, stretched resources, and modified its practices to meet the needs of an insatiable wartime environment. Under institutional adaptation, the primary purpose of personnel systems was to optimize and synchronize the resource of soldiers to the operational Army. Transformation changed the distribution of officers to BCT-centric growth and created a structural shortfall of field grade officers. The increase of theater requirements compounded the problem. Out of wartime necessity, the Army focused on resourcing the BCT-centric structure. Adverse trends such as school backlogs, lack of broadening experience, and personnel turbulence emerged as officers continued to recycle into combat.

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To fill the gap, the Army accelerated promotion windows and elevated officer promotion selection rates. These measures, along with the newly implemented practices of universal attendance by majors to Intermediate Level Education and the removal of numerical stratification for company-grade Officer Evaluation Reports (OERs), created younger officers who progressed through diluted competition.<sup>5</sup>

To its credit, the Army's leadership prevented the institution from breaking under wartime stress; however, the resulting defects or pathologies from institutional adaptation intensified cultural parochialism and the triviality of broadening experience. With the successful transition out of Iraq and the imminent transition out of Afghanistan, senior leaders are signaling the importance of maintaining high-quality volunteers and keeping "the right ones."<sup>6</sup> Current force-stabilization strategies subjugate officer developmental time, which inhibits the Officer Personnel Management System's ability to design career development.

The inherent defects preventing talent management are a lack of standardized doctrine, a lack of consistent practice, and the influence of a "muddy-boots" culture in career development.<sup>7</sup> To observe these defects, I will explain the emerging trends within our officer corps after 10 years of conflict, and then outline the implications should the system remain unchanged. I propose that the Army accepts short-range fixes as a bridging strategy until it adopts an effective system of talent management. Finally, I will provide a strategic model for talent management as an innovative long-term option.

## **The Legacy of War and Emerging Trends**

The wartime environment's insatiable personnel demands caused current theater needs and future developmental wants to diverge. For short-term survival, the Army emphasized BCT-centric assignments at the expense of education and broadening assignments, thus eviscerating critical windows of officer developmental timelines. Educational



School of Advanced Military Studies students, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2 November 2010.

backlogs grew for majors and lieutenant colonels by 30 to 40 percent per year group, and educational broadening programs, such as fellowships and scholarships, suffered as fewer officers applied for these programs.<sup>8</sup> In addition, joint duty became deemphasized; nearly half of infantry and armor general officers served their first joint assignment after brigade command.<sup>9</sup> Current statistics for joint-qualified maneuver field grades demonstrate the decline: colonels less than 33 percent, lieutenant colonels less than 5 percent, and majors less than 1 percent.<sup>10</sup> To further illustrate, the joint staff has roughly 50 percent of its statutory requirement for infantry officers.<sup>11</sup> Army doctrine does not provide a suitable frame of reference for joint assignments in developmental models. Each career branch defines key and developmental assignments, but fails to define broadening assignments, let alone a logical assignment sequence. Consequently, officers become fixated on five career assignments: platoon leader, company commander, operations/executive officer, battalion commander, and brigade commander. Maneuver officers believe that all other duty assignments are of less value and will place them at risk for nonselection for promotion.

Under the current trends, this belief is correct. The legacy of war intensified an existing cultural trend of muddy-boots experiences, skewing selection practices in favor of combat-centric assignments. Over the last two years, all infantry battalion commander-selects averaged 36 months in key developmental assignments as a major and 36 months as a captain, with just fewer than four percent having a joint duty assignment. Few had any assignment outside of the BCT; in fact, the most common broadening assignment was aide-de-camp. The scope of time demonstrates the disparity, as officers in each grade-plate served upwards of 80 percent of their developmental time within the BCT. Not only did gravity pull toward BCT-centric assignments, but their performance measures escalated as well.

Officers selected early for promotion, or “below the zone,” comprised 40 to 50 percent of those selected for command. Less than 10 percent of the officers ever received an average evaluation report. Brigade combat team-centric assignments became a valuable commodity for selection; hence, those in older year groups failed to rotate out of the BCT.

The resulting effect prevented an opportunity for junior officers to move up. In some cases, 25 to 30 percent of the officers in older year groups filled company command and brigade level staff positions. Promotion board selections demonstrated the difference in value between tactical and broadening assignments.<sup>12</sup>

The rise in value of tactical assignments sponsors the “muddy-boots” culture. For instance, the Officer Record Brief (ORB) is the officer’s résumé to the Army. The top-left corner of the ORB lists an officer’s combat experience—a fortuitous location considering how Western society reads—as it enables a reader to quickly ascertain the officer’s “combat-currency” and thereby the relevancy of his merit. Assignment histories prior to the war are not considered important. Their recent devolution decouples the link between assignment histories and performance evaluations. A developing trend influencing ORBs is recording duty titles twice—once while deployed and once in garrison to distinguish the separate roles. For a captain with seven years time in service to fill all twenty of his previous assignments fields after completing four combat tours is common.

While officer evaluations have a sordid history of inflation and have endured over 20 revisions, they remain the most important means to differentiate officers. Force ranking was added, removed, and modified numerous times, yet cultural practice deflated the numerical stratification as senior raters failed to adhere to a rating profile that forced them to make hard choices screening talent at the micro-level, instead of pushing the difficult decisions to a macro-level selection board.

The mismanagement of the OER has led to its current condition, which leaves “haves and have nots.” Field grade maneuver officers who receive

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a single average report, known as a center of mass report, are virtually eliminated from competition at the next gate for selection.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, the “muddy-boots” culture creates an inequity within the evaluation system. Large pools of ratees are more competitive, and an assignment to a unit with complex and unique missions adds more value to one’s OER. For example, special operations and Ranger assignments are selective; therefore, their evaluations are seen as having more value. Worth noting, the Office of Congressional Legislative Liaison is equally selective, and arguably has greater applicability to the Army’s future, yet “muddy-boots” culture does not value this assignment as much as it values a Ranger regiment assignment.

## Implications for the Future

Critics argue that the Army’s lack of a talent management model led to a diminished bench of strategic leaders. The growing discord stems from an inflexible personnel system that groups or batches promotions by service time instead of competence, arbitrarily distributes assignments, and possesses an evaluation system that is neither evaluative nor systemic.<sup>14</sup> Dissention includes the core of middle-grade officers, who noted there was “a gap in some espoused and in-use practices within the Army Profession.”<sup>15</sup> This gap is a recurring theme within the profession of arms.<sup>16</sup> In fact, it is the same language General Westmoreland surveyed over 40 years ago, and that General Shinseki surveyed a decade ago. Even over the last year, there has been critical feedback about the departure of talent for the private sector due to a command structure that rewards conformity and ignores merit.<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, how does the Army manage talent when its practice of selection is very narrow at the critical strategic gate of battalion command?

General Creighton Abrams, when told that company grade officers are idealistic, replied, “Yes and it’s our job to keep them that way.” Advice given to young officers who seek a successful career path are typically told to stay with troops. The five assignments resemble a progression up a steep ridgeline—platoon leader, company commander, S3/XO, battalion commander, brigade commander. Yet, these five assignments constitute perhaps only 10 years out of a 26-year career.



President Lyndon B. Johnson, GEN William Westmoreland, and president of South Vietnam Nguyen Van Thieu, October 1966. (National Archives, 192508)

What else is there for an officer to do? Doctrine should define broadening assignments at each grade, stratify those assignments, and then organize them into a logical progression. This sequencing should reinvest the officer’s experience into a higher headquarters and give predictability to the family. Without doctrinal changes, officers will continue to develop narrowly and the Army will become challenged to conduct succession planning as its strategic bench strength erodes.

When reviewing the anatomy of a selection board, it becomes evident that some boards are better equipped for selection than others. For instance, the colonel promotion board is a statutory panel comprised of 17 general officers, with the board president a lieutenant general. The panel must be representative of joint duty, previous BCT command, and demographics.<sup>18</sup> This board considers nearly 3,000 officers in 14 days, creating a workload of 200 to 250 files a day. Reviewing files for 10 hours per day gives a board member two to three minutes per officer file. In that small window of time the board member reviews an officer’s ORB, official photograph, and OERs, then determines a numerical standing of the officer relative to his peer group. This panel of very senior leaders have written evaluations for lieutenant colonels and colonels

and possess depth in broadening assignments. It is clear that this board is well-suited to select the best candidates for promotion.

Conversely, when reviewing the same metrics for a policy board, such as the lieutenant colonel command/key billet board, the panel has only one general officer, the rest are colonels. The experiential composition is considerably less. In fact, the broadening experience of a colonel is the same as a lieutenant colonel. With selection rates at 30 percent, battalion command is the Army's first arduous board.

The same problems persist for another policy board, the Senior Service College board, and the size of the zone it must consider nearly doubles, exceeding 5,000 files—the zone of consideration may span six year groups—creating a daunting workload. If the Army continues this practice for selection boards, it may decide the fate of an officer—a million-plus dollar investment that took 16 years to build—in only three minutes.<sup>19</sup>

## A Bridging Strategy: Small Fixes to Effect Large Change

The Officer Record Brief needs to regain its résumé form. It should display the officer's depth of experience in the Army and overtly display any special skills that are important to the Army. With minimal assistance, a CEO of a *Fortune 500* company should be able to read and understand an ORB. There is considerable difference between Army curriculum vitae and those of civilians. Changing this will provide better interoperability for the officer in broadening assignments.

To avoid grade-plate pooling by having junior year groups ballast senior year groups evaluations, the Army should institute force ranking annually within their respective year groups instead of grade-plates. As the officer grows, so should his ranking, which provides a clear point of reference each year. Brigade combat teams should conduct the comparative analysis within their command, and then selection boards can conduct the analysis across the Army.

In addition, BCT commanders have too large a profile to manage. It is important to reduce their span of control for evaluations. Restoring block checks to captain evaluations will increase magnitude. Realign the rating chains for a trade-off. For example, deputy commanding generals (DCGs) at

the division level should senior rate those in BCT S3/XO "key and developmental" assignments, especially if the officer is promotable. The DCGs have a better perspective for comparative analysis across the relative BCTs, and this would add weight to the evaluations.

The lieutenant colonel policy boards (command selection and senior service college) need changing too. They should reflect the same statutory requirements as the colonels' promotion board. Except for the board president, the membership of those policy boards lacks requisite experience to discern talent. Moreover, they find themselves inundated with files that are not competitive for selection. Select the best talent early by having the strategic leaders picked at the strategic gate, and reduce the number of officers on the board. Ensuring the board is comprised of officers with broadening experience is a good way to increase the value of broadening.

A method to reduce mirror-effect bias is to remove or "mask" names on evaluations and remove pictures. The Army could do this by only displaying page two (the backside) of the OER, or replace all names with identifying numbers. With two to three minutes per file, board members spend little time on the first page of the OER, except to see the name and rank of the senior rater and height and weight of the officer. The Army's senior leaders should review the demographic results of the board. Attributing trends to the boards becomes a tautology, especially when the boards comprise the collective membership.

Last, Army regulations and manning guidance need compliance management. For example, as the lack of professional military education attendance created backlogs at Intermediate Level Education and senior service colleges, the Army chief of staff directed lieutenant colonels to complete Intermediate Level Education prior to command. He personally adjudicates brigade command slating for those colonels who defer senior service college attendance.<sup>20</sup> A simple measure to ensure BCT commanders manage officers' developmental time effectively is to require monthly reporting on the unit status reports. Brigade combat team commanders are held accountable for the readiness of their equipment, why not for their identifying identifying officers' developmental time? It is a finite resource.



**Figure**

## Creating a Meritocracy in the Profession of Arms

Large organizations are constrained with respect to the resources of time, structure, and budget. The sheer size of the competition may obscure a service member's merits. Classifying today's Officer Personnel Management System as a meritocracy is inaccurate. The system transformed to meet the Army's needs of growth and readiness for operational requirements. Doctrine, practice, and culture are contributing factors to its current condition. To continue to refine, the fixes must apply to all three critical components. Transitioning to a talent management system is a strategic-level problem. There are more steps in the process than "screen, vet, and cull."<sup>21</sup> While all three are functional imperatives, the Army needs to adopt the practice of succession management, sharing talent selection in an open dialog with its collective membership. The Army has the basic requirements for discerning talent, but it needs to arrange a complementary framework to

create a system of talent management. A Creative Metrics white paper frames this line of thought: "Although succession management is one of the most long-term and strategic investments an organization can make, it doesn't have to be one of the most complicated."<sup>22</sup> Following this line of thought, the Army could modify existing procedures and incorporate a five-step model for "strategic talent management"

## Conclusion

The Army modified its personnel practices to meet the persistent demands of war. The constraints of manpower and time stressed the institution, and its modification of existing practices led to pathologies. While the muddy-boots culture is a long-standing trend, its intensified parochialism affects the way we select future leaders, thus causing a deeper cleavage between espoused and in-use practices. Downsizing is only one of the certain changes the Army must manage to create a credible meritocracy. The Army needs to adopt a system of talent management.

Our current narrow wartime selection practices will not serve the Army well in the 21st century. Continuing to select future leaders on culturally valued criteria from the last conflict will reduce experience and educational diversity in our officer corps. The way of the future is to implement practices that emphasize broadening experiences to develop a wide range of skills,

capabilities, and aptitudes. This nation's decisive force possesses unmatched lethal capacity; however, its capacity to build relationships within the future Joint Force 2020 requires experience in joint, interagency, inter-governmental, and multinational assignments. These broadening experiences should be the culturally valued criteria for the next conflict.<sup>23</sup> **MR**

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#### NOTES

1. GEN Raymond T. Odierno, "CSA remarks at the U.S. Army's Institute of Land Warfare Winter Symposium and Exposition," United States Army Homepage Online, <[http://www.army.mil/article/74452/Regional\\_unit\\_alignments\\_could\\_match\\_brigades\\_with\\_combatant\\_commanders](http://www.army.mil/article/74452/Regional_unit_alignments_could_match_brigades_with_combatant_commanders)> (25 February 2012).

2. U.S. Army Field Manual 1, *The Army* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], June 2005), 1-1.

3. Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1994). Young introduces the concept of meritocracy in 1957 as a credible alternative to grievances of nepotism. It is designed as "a system of managing talent, which the talented are chosen and moved ahead on the basis of their achievement."

4. U.S. Department of the Army, "2009 Army Posture Statement," United States Army Homepage Online, <[http://www.army.mil/aps/09/information\\_papers/institutional\\_adaptation.html](http://www.army.mil/aps/09/information_papers/institutional_adaptation.html)> (28 February 2012).

5. Stratification, known by the Army as "block check," refers to the senior rater's assessment of the rated officer's overall potential in comparison with all other officers of the same grade. (The intent is for senior raters to use this box to identify their upper third in each grade.) In order to maintain a credible profile, the senior rater must have less than 50 percent of the ratings of a grade in the top box. In addition, accelerated promotion windows enabled officers to pin-on rank 6 to 12 months earlier and elevated promotion rates 20 to 30 percent higher than the 1980 Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (1980) established zones. With promotion rates to major and lieutenant colonel exceeding 95 percent, typical nonselects were those not in keeping with Army values.

6. GEN Raymond T. Odierno, "CSA remarks at AUSA Institute of Land Warfare Breakfast," 25 January 2012, United States Army Homepage Online, <[http://www.army.mil/article/72513/Jan\\_25\\_2012\\_CSA\\_remarks\\_at\\_AUSA\\_Institute\\_of\\_Land\\_Warfare\\_Breakfast](http://www.army.mil/article/72513/Jan_25_2012_CSA_remarks_at_AUSA_Institute_of_Land_Warfare_Breakfast)> (6 February 2012).

7. U.S. Department of the Army, DA PAM 600-3, *Commissioned Officer Professional Development and Career Management* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1 February 2010), defines developmental as "all officer positions are developmental" and broadening experience as "assignments outside the officer's core branch or functional area."

8. The Army was structurally growing more majors and faster, yet its seats available to educate did not change. As theater requirements grew, operational deferments for Senior Service College rose 200 percent in 10 years.

9. The Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 changed personal management of military officers. Officers were required to progress through levels of Joint Professional Military Education and, routinely, serve in joint duty positions as part of their career development. Service compliance is briefed to Congress, annually. Officers must meet these requirements or they are not eligible for promotion to general/flag officer. While surveying all 428 general officer biographies, infantry and armor composed nearly one-third of the body or 129 general officers. Of the 129 infantry and armor

general officers, over 45 percent completed their first joint assignment as a colonel. Additionally, most of their joint experience was in combat theater structure and the average joint service in months for colonel-promotable was 23 months.

10. Data from the United States Army Human Resources Command, OPMD-MFE-I.

11. U.S. Code, Title X, Section 661, *Office of the Law Revision Counsel*, available at <<http://uscode.house.gov>>. This statutory requirement states that the Secretary of Defense will ensure that one-half (50 percent) of Joint Duty Authorized List positions in the grade of major and above are filled to ensure joint matters.

12. Data from the U.S. Army Human Resources Command, OPMD-MFE-I.

13. Ibid.

14. Tim Kane, "Why Our Best Officers are Leaving," *The Atlantic*, January-February 2011.

15. "2011 Profession of Arms Survey," CAPE Home, 17 January 2012, available at <<http://cape.army.mil/ProfessionOfArmsSurvey.html>>.

16. Study on Military Professionalism (Westmoreland Study), U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA, June 1970.

17. Andrew Tilghman, "The Army's Other Crisis: Why the Best and Brightest Young Officers are Leaving," *The Washington Monthly*, December 2007: 44,53. Transcriptions, CQ, "July 21, 2011—Senate Armed Services Committee holds confirmation hearing on nominations," United States Army, 21 July 2011, <<http://www.army.mil/article/62076>> (17 September 2011).

18. Department of the Army, Memorandum, *FY12 Officer and Enlisted Board Membership Requirements Tasking Matrices* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, Office the Chief of Staff, G-1, August 2011.).

19. The average cost of a college education is \$200,000. The pay and entitlement averages exceed \$880,000 over 16 years. Added costs for training, movement, and education are contributing factors.

20. Broadening assignments, or as current culture refers "take-a-knee" assignments, are culturally conflicting. Officers learn to exemplify leader attributes by enduring with their soldiers. The distinction of commanding soldiers, above all, in combat, is the most revered duty and any staff assignment outside of "muddy-boots" is not of noble-merit and will put an officer at-risk for promotion.

21. Casey Wardynski, David S. Lyle, and Michael J. Colarusso, *Talent: Implications for a U.S. Army Officer Corps Strategy* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2009).

22. Creative Metrics, Inc., "Creative Metrics Succession Cycle," 2011, available at <<http://www.creativemetrics.com/factsheets/succession-management-cycle.pdf>> (2 February 2012).

23. GEN Raymond T. Odierno, "Marching Orders" January 2012, United States Army Homepage Online, available at <<http://usarmy.vo.llnwd.net/e2/c/downloads/234187.pdf>> (8 February 2012).